

WILLIAM BYRD

The Fourth of July is a date famous throughout the world for its significance in American history. But in the time long before the Declaration of Independence, when England and America were still at one, and the Elizabethan Age was as surely the heritage of New as of Old England, the date acquired an association which is being commemorated by Englishmen this year with a mingling of reverence and delighted discovery. For July 4 is the Tercentenary of William Byrd, a man held in his own time to be the greatest in that group of brilliant composers who adorned the Elizabethan Age, but since his own time almost forgotten, until English musicians of today, men of the British Renaissance practically rediscovered him. During three centuries he had been little more than a name, known only by his less representative and least authentic works. It was as if Shakespeare had been known to posterity only by 'The Comedy of Errors' and 'Henry viii'. Like Shakespeare too, details of his career are scanty. Though his immediate friends called him a 'Father of music' and 'Homo Mirabilis' no biography was ever written and such facts as have been ascertained represent much patient research. From them it seems fairly clear that William Byrd, (born 1543) was a native of Lincolnshire, and the evidence points to Epworth as having been his early home. If this was so, then he came from the very district where years later, when Byrd himself

was a very old man,- the Separatists of Scrooby and Gainsborough gave the Pilgrim Fathers to the New World. And though Byrd held to the older forms of worship while the Pilgrims sought religious freedom, it needs no stretch of imagination to recognize in both the same tenacity, the same steadfast courage, and devotion to the dictates of conscience.

As a musician Byrd developed early, Legend has it he was a pupil of Thomas Tallis, but the first authentic fact is that he was appointed organist of Lincoln Cathedral at the age of twenty. The years that followed cannot have differed greatly from those of a Cathedral organist today and it is easy to realize what an effect the 'Minster' must have had on his artistic temperament. To work daily in such a building, to watch 'the frozen music' of its architecture was to receive a silent, but immensely powerful education in the fundamental laws of beauty and design. Romance joined Art. On Sept. 14, 1568 Byrd was married to Ellen (or Julian Birley, and presently children gladdened the young couple. Then ~~he~~ came a court appointment. On Feb. 22, 1569 Byrd was made a member of Queen Elizabeth's Chapel Royal, and moved to London somewhere about ¹⁵⁷¹⁻² ~~1571~~. Soon after he again removed his household, this time to Harlington, a remote village in Middlesex. His reason is unknown, but it must have been a strong one to set him thus far from his work entailing frequent journeys across Hounslow Heath, a place well-known for highwaymen. At the Chapel Royal he and Tallis shared the duties of Organist between them, and in 1575 they entered a partnership for printing and selling music and

music paper under a patent obtained from Queen Elizabeth. One conjectures they were not then as experienced in business as in composition, for by 1577 Byrd had 'fallen into debt and necessity'. However, matters mended somewhat, and in spite of various ups and downs, and the worries ~~of~~ consequent on frequent indictments of his household as 'Recusants', he poured forth a flood of noble compositions. His first published works had been some Motets issued in conjunction with Tallis in 1575, but in 1588, (the year of the Spanish Armada, when all England was glowing with patriotism and ringing with the exploits of the Lord Admiral Howard and Francis Drake) Byrd published his famous volume of 'Psalmes, Sonets, and Songs of Sadnes and Pietie'. This was clearly one of the prosperous periods in his career - a wave of success comes to composers when they first capture the public ear, and which presently ebbs again when the public finds that a composer values his art above their dictates. Byrd's tide of prosperity lasted a few years and a large number of compositions and publications date from this period. Then followed twenty years of comparative inactivity; - why, no one knows. A theory has been advanced that Byrd was too much occupied with lawsuits and the business of a property he had recently acquired at Stow^{ton}don in Essex to attend to composition. This is possible. He, like Shakespeare, evidently desired to become a landed gentleman at large out of the proceeds of his earnings. Another theory is that Byrd being a 'Recusant', and finding it advisable to efface him, adopted the name of Borne, and

worked with Henslowe as an actor and dramatist. Who knows - this also may have been. After these mysterious years, with sparse publications, came another rich period of artistic output. Two volumes, the Gradualia, appeared in 1607, a second edition in 1610, and in 1611 'Psalmes, Songs and Sonnets'. About this time Byrd also contributed to the famous collection of Virginal music called 'Parthenia' and four anthems of his came out in the year 1614. He continued to reside at Stondon Place in 'good healthe and perfect memorie' till July 4 1623.

In this handful of facts there is nothing special to stir the imagination or to bring the present day reader into touch with Byrd as a personality. Had his works perished, the old musician would seem little more to us than a faded fresco upon a wall. But happily his compositions, though long forgotten have not been lost. Over five hundred are extant, and though only a proportion is available as yet in print, this proportion provides ample material from which to judge Byrd's grave genius and genial nature. To read his prefaces to the volumes of 1588, 1589, and 1611 is like suddenly finding the warm handclasp of a friend across the centuries. In 1588 he signs himself 'the most assured friend to all that love or learne Musicke'. By 1589 he is their 'most affectionate freend', and in his last volume (following the formal dedication to the Earl of Cumberland) comes the superscription 'to all true lovers of Musicke, W. Byrd wisheth all true happiness both temporall and eternall'.

That he himself loved music passionately there is no doubt - indeed he admits it in the 1611 preface, and the best way both to understand and praise him is to study and perform his works. But the full enjoyment of his works music is not a thing to be acquired in a moment. These are orchestral days, and when many people can take an emotional hold at one hearing on - say a Tschaikowsky Symphony, but few have a natural taste for pure choral music, and only a minority have that full understanding of the history of music which enables them to place Byrd's achievements in their true relation to what lay behind and what was still to come. Byrd with Palestrina as a contemporary stood at the end of the old Contrapuntal order, when vocal polyphony had been brought to perfection. Equally Byrd stood at the beginning of the new Harmonic order, with Monteverde, its pioneer, also as a contemporary. It is one of the real glories of Byrd that he was fully aware of old and new. While Palestrina was content to confine himself to choral church music, Byrd boldly essayed many types of composition, sacred and secular, vocal and instrumental. Though slightly inferior to Palestrina in the quality of pure perfection, he greatly exceeded him in range. This many sidedness is at once an attraction and a stumbling block. In choral music Byrd expressed himself through a medium made perfect by time and experience, but a subsequent desuetude of ³⁰⁰ ~~200~~ years has left modern ears unaccustomed and unresponsive to this medium. In Harmonic music where we are most at home, Byrd was that touching thing, a mature artist working with immature means. So despite

his greatness, he makes unusual demands on the sympathy and imagination of students. His virginal pieces show a mingling of real beauty with naive technique and a still quainter realism. The fine Fantasias for strings approach more nearly to concrete achievement. Here the freshness of his themes, their intensely English quality, links them with that spring of Folk song which is one of the sure sources for national music. As a Madrigal writer, if not the greatest, he was yet the earliest in the field among Englishmen, and the variety and charm of his works is great. But it is in his sacred music, especially in his settings of the Mass that we come face to face with his full powers as a composer. It is difficult to convey in words an idea of the complex simplicity, strength, majestic modesty and noble pathos of his style. Take for instance, such a matter as the number of parts employed. Byrd had a most sensitive perception of the properties of voices and the proportions to be observed in their treatment. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion the 4 part work (our modern conventional norm) interested him the least. In 3 parts he evidently enjoyed the call on his invention made by the necessity for producing a satisfactory ^{ying} effect with slender means, and his bold melodic outlines, comprehensive and freely moving parts are models of constructive skill both by what they achieve and by what they imply. In 5 part work he seemed at his happiest, inspired to endless variety of lovely vocal effects by the means at his command, now contrapuntal, now harmonic,

his material malleable to the finest shade of expression. In 6 parts again his methods subtly changes becoming more majestic and architectural. ~~Or take the matter of thematic invention,~~

Or take the matter of thematic invention. Though he occasionally employed phrases that belong to the contrapuntal stock in trade of his time, for the most part he was extraordinarily successful in inventing melodic subjects that were not only musically distinctive but which represent an emotional and intellectual expression of the words set. As examples, one may cite the noble settings of Psalms 'Even from the depth', (1588) and 'Unto the hills mine eyes I lift', and the glorious Easter anthem to String accompaniment with its rising and splendidly confident phrases from the 1589 volume. Nor was he content with initial success. As a work progressed he developed its message by every means in his power. He designed on large lines, yet no details were beneath his care. As an example of his progressive invention one may cite his wonderful 6 part setting of 'Turn our captivity, O Lord', where the work grows logically from a phrase that is hardly more than a sigh on the words 'Turn our captivity' to a splendour of sound and woven melodies on 'They shall come with jollity, carrying their sheaves with them'

As examples of his care for detail one may note the subtle colouration he achieved by maintaining in certain works the same general melodic trend as that set by the initial phrases, either up or down, or wave shaped. For instance, in

" Sing we merrily unto God ", the whole tendency is upward.

Or take again his skill in the use of " false relations." Where many English composers were content to let these keen clashes occur at random, Byrd used them to heighten his expression at emotional crises. A magnificent example occurs in the closing bars of " Even from the Depth."

Indeed, these closing passages often contain the rarest beauties in his works. One learns to look for them with tender admiration, for there the old Elizabethan reveals something more than can be said in words ~~W~~ the vision which is granted to the pure in heart.

M.M.S.